

Message Text

SECRET

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ACTION NODS-00

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O 311312Z AUG 78
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 9498
INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN
AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMCONSUL JERUSALEM
AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV IMMEDIATE
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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 05129

EXDIS, DISTRIBUTE AS NODIS

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PEPR, IS, LE, SY
SUBJECT: ASSESSMENT OF SYRIAN INTENTIONS IN LIGHT OF
ISRAELI ESTIMATES

REF: TEL AVIV 11400

1. SUMMARY: I BELIEVE IT IS IMPORTANT THAT WE SHARE WITH
THE GOI AN ASSESSMENT OF SYRIAN INTENTIONS DRAWN FROM OUR
(AND, WE WOULD SUPPOSE, THE DEPARTMENT'S) PERSPECTIVE. I
HAVE MY DOUBTS ABOUT THE ISRAELI ASSESSMENT THAT SYRIA
SEEKS TO OPEN A NEW CONFRONTATION BORDER WITH ISRAEL.
ASSAD HAS SAID THIS IS NOT HIS OBJECTIVE AND ALL INDICA-
TIONS ARE HE WANTS AND NEEDS THE LEBANESE BORDER TO BE
NEUTRAL. IRAQI FORCES PROBABLY WOULD TRY TO ENTER IN
EVENT OF ALL-OUT WAR BUT, GIVEN THE ANIMOSITY BETWEEN
SYRIA AND IRAQ, ASSAD WOULD BE FOOLISH TO DEPEND ON THE
IRAQIS IN HIS STRATEGY. WHILE RECOGNIZING PRIMIN BEGIN'S
CONCERN FOR RELIGIOUS MINORITIES, DO NOT BELIEVE THIS IS AT
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ISSUE IN LEBANON. THE LONG-TERM SYRIAN DOMINATION OF
LEBANON WHICH ISRAEL FEARS IS NOT FEASIBLE IN THE ABSENCE
OF PERMANENT SYRIAN MILITARY OCCUPATION. FOR BOTH
DOMESTIC AND STRATEGIC REASONS, SYRIA REJECTS THIS ROLE.
END SUMMARY.

2. I CAN APPRECIATE THE GRAVITY WITH WHICH THE GOI VIEWS

CURRENT SITUATION IN LEBANON. WHILE I DO NOT UNDERRATE THE SERIOUSNESS OF THE CURRENT SITUATION IN LEBANON AND THE POTENTIAL FOR BROADER CONFLICT, I DO NOT SHARE THE GOI ESTIMATE OF SYRIAN INTENTIONS AND SUGGEST THAT IT MAY BE USEFUL TO SHARE OUR PERCEPTIONS FROM THIS PERSPECTIVE WITH PRIME MINISTER BEGIN.

3. WHILE ONE MUST HAVE RESPECT FOR ISRAELI MILITARY ASSESSMENTS, I DO NOT SHARE THE CONCLUSION THAT IT IS IN SYRIA'S INTEREST TO OPEN A SECOND CONFRONTATION BORDER WITH ISRAEL. IN PART, I BASE MY ESTIMATE ON PRESIDENT ASSAD'S OFT-REPEATED CATEGORICAL REJECTION OF THE CONCEPT THAT LEBANON IS IN ANY WAY CONNECTED WITH THE ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT, MOST RECENTLY REPEATED ON AUGUST 28. OBVIOUSLY I DO NOT EXPECT THE ISRAELIS TO TAKE PRESIDENT ASSAD'S STATEMENTS AT FACE VALUE, BUT ONE LOOK AT THE MAP SUGGESTS THAT OPENING A LEBANESE FRONT WOULD WORK TO ISRAEL'S RATHER THAN TO SYRIA'S ADVANTAGE IN THE EVENT OF A MAJOR WAR. IT HAS BEEN MY UNDERSTANDING THAT ISRAEL HAS ANTICIPATED THE NEED FOR AN ALTERNATIVE TO A FRONTAL ATTACK ON THE GOLAN IN ORDER TO THREATEN DAMASCUS AND ENCIRCLE THE SYRIAN ARMY. ONE SUCH ROUTE IS JORDAN; THE OTHER, OF COURSE, IS LEBANON. IF THE LEBANESE BORDER BECOMES A CONFRONTATION AREA BY VIRTUE OF SYRIA'S ACTIONS IN LEBANON, SYRIA WILL BE FORCED TO DIVIDE PERMANENTLY ITS
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ARMY. INSOLUBLE PROBLEMS WILL RESULT IN SUPPLY AND COMMAND COORDINATION, BOTH OF WHICH ARE SYRIA'S WEAKEST POINTS. ISRAEL, WITH SUPERIOR COMMAND AND CONTROL, SUPPLY, MOBILITY, AND AIRPOWER, WOULD MAKE MINCEMEAT OF SUCH A BIFURCATED SYRIAN FORCE. SYRIA'S BEST OPTION STRATEGICALLY, IT APPEARS TO ME, IS TO DEFEND THE GOLAN HEIGHTS IN DEPTH AND HOPE FOR THE CONTINUED NEUTRALITY OF LEBANON. SYRIA'S FULL SUPPORT FOR UNIFIL'S PRESENCE IN SOUTH LEBANON IS AN INDICATION THAT THE SYRIAN AUTHORITIES SEEK TO NEUTRALIZE THE BORDER AREA FROM THE CURRENT CONFLICT AND POTENTIAL CONFLICT IN THE AREA. ACCORDINGLY, I AM INCLINED TO BELIEVE PRESIDENT ASSAD MEANS IT WHEN HE SAYS THAT HE DOES NOT WANT LEBANON TO BE INVOLVED IN THE ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT.

4. DEFMIN WEIZMAN RAISED THE PROBABILITY OF IRAQI INVOLVEMENT IN A NEW WAR, AND I AGREE THAT IRAQ WOULD ENDEAVOR TO SEND UNITS UNDER THESE CIRCUMSTANCES. NEVERTHELESS, THEIR EFFECTIVENESS AND ROLE IN A MAJOR CONFLICT IS OPEN TO SERIOUS QUESTION IN THE ABSENCE OF PRIOR MILITARY PLANNING AND COORDINATION BETWEEN THE TWO COUNTRIES. I RECOGNIZE THAT ISRAEL MUST MAKE ITS PLANS ON THE BASIS OF WORST CASE

POSSIBILITIES. NEVERTHELESS, THE CURRENT POLITICAL ANIMOSITY BETWEEN IRAQ AND SYRIA SHOWS NOT THE SLIGHTEST HINT OF ABATING AND UNDER THESE CONDITIONS THERE CAN BE NO SERIOUS MILITARY COORDINATION BETWEEN THE TWO COUNTRIES. THE SUSPICIONS BETWEEN THE LEADERSHIPS OF THE TWO COUNTRIES ARE AS INTENSE AS THOSE BETWEEN ISRAEL AND SYRIA AND JUST AS ISRAEL MUST PLAN ON THE WORST CASE BASIS SO MUST SYRIA. IT CANNOT NECESSARILY COUNT ON IRAQI SUPPORT IN THE EVENT

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OF WAR--OR BE CONFIDENT THAT ENTRY OF IRAQI TROOPS INTO SYRIA WOULD NOT BE USED PRIMARILY TO UNDERMINE THE SYRIAN REGIME--AND THUS CANNOT SEEK A MILITARY DEPLOYMENT ON THE GROUND ON TWO FRONTS IN WHICH SYRIAN FORCES IN THE EAST WOULD DEPEND ON IRAQI GOODWILL FOR SURVIVAL.

5. DAYAN SPEAKS OF LEBANON BECOMING A PART OF GREATER SYRIA. AFTER TWO YEARS AND 30,000 PLUS TROOPS, LEBANON IS NO CLOSER TO BEING A SYRIAN PROVINCE THAN IT HAS EVER BEEN. IF ANYTHING, SYRIA FACES GREATER SUSPICION OF ITS INTENTIONS AND HOSTILITY TODAY FROM ALL SIDES OF THE SPECTRUM THAN EVER BEFORE. SYRIA HAS BEEN NOTABLY UNSUCCESSFUL IN ALL ITS ATTEMPTS TO FORM A SYMPATHETIC POLITICAL BLOC WHICH CAN DOMINATE LEBANON. I BELIEVE SYRIAN POLITICAL LEADERSHIP HAS RECOGNIZED THAT THE ONLY WAY SYRIA COULD EXERCISE THE KIND OF LONG-RUN DOMINATION

DAYAN FEARS IS THROUGH EXTENSIVE AND PERMANENT MILITARY
OCCUPATION, SOMETHING WHICH WE ARE CONVINCED SYRIA DOES
NOT REPEAT NOT WANT FOR A NUMBER OF REASONS, INCLUDING
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DOMESTIC CONSIDERATIONS, AS WELL AS THE FACT THAT THIS,
AS THE ISRAELIS ARE AWARE, MEANS THE DISPERSAL OF SYRIAN
TROOPS AND THE REDUCTION OF FORCES AVAILABLE TO CONFRONT
ISRAEL.

6. I RECOGNIZE PRIME MINISTER BEGIN'S DEEP COMMITMENT
TO THE PROTECTION OF MINORITIES IN VIEW OF HIS PEOPLES'
HISTORICAL EXPERIENCE. IF I BELIEVED FOR AN INSTANT THAT
SYRIA INTENDED TO DESTROY A RELIGIOUS MINORITY IN LEBANON,
I WOULD AGREE WITH HIM THAT SOMEONE MUST SAVE THE CHRIS-
TIAN. HOWEVER, AS I HAVE SAID BEFORE, I DO NOT BELIEVE
THAT THIS IS THE SYRIAN INTENTION. THEY ARE FACING A
POLITICAL AND MILITARY THREAT TO THE INTEGRITY OF THE
LEBANESE STATE AND THE AUTHORITY OF THE LEBANESE GOVERN-
MENT. RELIGION IS NOT AN ISSUE HERE. THIS IS A QUESTION
OF THE ULTIMATE POLITICAL BALANCE IN LEBANON. SYRIA DOES
NOT SEE ITS ROLE AS MERELY PRESERVING SECURITY, BUT
RATHER TO ESTABLISH SECURITY. IT IS NOT, THEREFORE, PRE-
PARED TO ACCEPT INDEFINITELY THE EXISTENCE OF A MARONITE
MINI-STATE THAT WILL ACCEPT NO OTHER SECURITY PRESENCE
THAN ITS OWN MILITIAS. ITS BASIC NATIONAL SECURITY PURPOSE
SINCE IT INTERVENED IN 1976 HAS BEEN TO PREVENT THE
ESTABLISHMENT OF A HOSTILE POLITICAL ENTITY ON ITS
WESTERN FLANK, WHETHER, AS WAS ORIGINALLY THE CASE, PRO-
IRAQI, OR, AS IS NOW THE CASE, PRO-ISRAELI MARONITE.

7. I DO NOT DISCOUNT THE POSSIBILITY THAT ASSAD IS TAKING
ADVANTAGE OF THE PRE-CAMP DAVID SITUATION TO IMPROVE THE
MILITARY POSITION OF HIS FORCES AND THEIR ABILITY TO EXER-
CISE CONTROL OVER THE PHALANGE AND AHRAR MILITIAS, ALTHOUGH
THE TIMING MAY BE COINCIDENTAL, RESULTING PURELY FROM LOCAL
DEVELOPMENTS. I BELIEVE THAT ASSAD IS UNDER STRONG PRES-
SURE FROM HIS MILITARY TO GO FURTHER AND FASTER TO ESTAB-
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LISH SECURITY AND TO CURTAIL THE CONTINUING HIGH LEVEL OF
SYRIAN LOSSES. THIS IS CERTAINLY A DANGEROUS COURSE AND
WE ARE DOING EVERYTHING WE CAN TO COUNSEL AGAINST SUCH
ACTION. NEVERTHELESS, IT IS MY ESTIMATE THAT THE STAKES
ARE NOT AS HIGH AS ISRAELI AUTHORITIES APPEAR TO BELIEVE.
THEREFORE, I THINK IT IS IMPORTANT THAT THEY HEAR AN

ASSESSMENT DRAWN FROM A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE AND ONE WHICH WE FIRMLY BELIEVE IS THE CORRECT ONE.

8. I RECOMMEND THAT EMBASSY TEL AVIV BE AUTHORIZED TO CONVEY FOREGOING ASSESSMENT TO THE ISRAELIS, EITHER AS THE CONSIDERED JUDGMENT OF THIS EMBASSY, OR PREFERABLY AS THE BEST JUDGMENT OF THE DEPARTMENT. SEELYE

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